

The Use of Theater and Drama Techniques to Foster Speaking Skills in the English Class

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Abstract

The use of theater techniques can go beyond the stage. The following article aims to demonstrate this assertion. The article presents eight activities based on theater games that were adapted taking into consideration the contents and objectives of the English national syllabus established by the Minister of Public Education of Costa Rica. Each activity is described in detail to provide the reader with an easy guide for their application. At the same time, the author provides information that claims for the effectiveness of the use of theater techniques in teaching-learning processes.

Key words: theater, teaching, drama, techniques, English

Resumen

El uso de las técnicas teatrales puede ir más allá del escenario y este estudio tiene el objetivo de demostrar esta aserción. El artículo presenta ocho actividades basadas en juegos teatrales que fueron adaptadas tomando en cuenta contenidos y objetivos del programa nacional de inglés establecido por el Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica. Cada actividad está descrita detalladamente para dar al lector una guía fácil para su aplicación. Al mismo tiempo, el autor brinda información que asegura la efectividad del uso de las técnicas teatrales en los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje.

Palabras claves: teatro, enseñanza, drama, técnicas, inglés

Introduction

When it comes to the teaching and learning processes, it is possible to say that many ideas have been proposed in order to look for the most effective way to transmit knowledge. Teachers are constantly trying new methods and techniques to get more effective lessons so that students can have a better understanding of any subject they are studying. However, the “perfect method” has not been found yet, and it will probably never be found, the reason? We are all different, what works for a specific individual may not work for another one, there are several aspects influencing this such as generational changes and cultural differences, among others.

Lagos & Palacios (2010) consider that education is a formative process per se that every individual may take ownership of thereby internalizing knowledge, traditions, and values. That is every teacher’s mission: providing students the best opportunities for them to improve themselves. Nevertheless, this is not as easy as it sounds since when dealing with people it is impossible to avoid that fact that there are differences and because of those differences the process always tends to be more challenging.

Based on the idea of the individual differences, teachers have to look for more innovative methodologies that may be more inclusive in terms of learning styles and multiple intelligences. These ideas could bring into the classroom a variety of activities that can be seen as motivating as well.

When talking about foreign language teaching the situation is even

more complex since we are talking about a group of skills that the students have to master in order to be able to communicate and express their ideas and feelings. Teaching and learning a foreign language requires an extra effort from instructors and learners. There have been a series of approaches and methodologies on language teaching and learning throughout the years that have tried to build bridges to join knowledge and comprehension; however, there has always been a lot of disagreement on what the best method or approach is and that is why there are plenty of them. Muñoz (2010) considers that methodologies on language teaching have evolved in time; this fact is reflected on the teachers’ actions.

Nowadays, it is necessary to move forward even more than before. Approaches such as the audio-lingual, the silent way, the grammar-translation, the Total Physical Response and even the communicative, among others were relevant and provided basis for what we have in the present. Right now it is beneficial to take what we consider is best from those approaches, mix them and develop something new so we can take advantage of it. Therefore, it is time to innovate and include different activities and techniques in our class. Where can we find the resources to have more attractive and different classes? Perhaps those resources are not too far from us; perhaps they can be on stage.

This article aims to present and develop a group of theater activities and exercises that can be easily adapted to teach English as a second language. It is not about teaching drama or literature which have been taught for many years in different ways. The focus of the activities presented

in this document is to foster the teaching-learning process of speaking skills. Even though the activities to be presented can be used and adapted to almost any context, subject and level, the population to be considered is high school students. Each of the theater or acting activities and exercises is adapted based on the contents and objectives proposed by the Ministry of Public Education of Costa Rica (MEP).

This article deals with the importance of the use of drama techniques and exercises in an educative context. The idea is to detect the most important benefits that this type of activities can provide English teachers and students when teaching and or learning English as a second or foreign language.

Context

Relevant aspects regarding the subject to be developed in the article

Definition of terms

The famous Spaniard playwright Federico García Lorca once said that theater is poetry that comes out the book to humanize itself. The magic of theater is able to take readers and theatergoers to different places, to other realities, other lives and other times. Without a doubt, this creating force is able to provoke different emotions in its audience.

It seems that there is a distinction between drama and theater, in fact, Wessels (1987) quoted by Ulldemolins (2014) considers that “Drama is doing. Drama is being. Drama is such a normal thing. It is something that

we engage in daily when faced with difficult situations” (p. 6). Courtney (1980) as quoted by Ulldemolins (2014) defines drama as “the human process whereby imaginative thought becomes action, drama is based on internal empathy and identification, as leads to external impersonation” (p. 6). It is what leads to physical representation of feelings and thoughts. Theater, on the other hand, according to Elam (1980) cited by Ulldemolins (2014) is a “phenomenon associated with the performer-audience transaction” (p. 6). Therefore, theater deals more with the actual performance of a dramatic action, that is, whatever actors, actresses and directors are able to put on stage in order to represent a group of ideas, emotions and thoughts proposed by a playwright.

Before actors and actresses have a play ready to be presented on stage, the creation process is long and hard. It is not easy to embody a fictional character whose life is probably too different from the actor’s or actress’ life. In order to be able to present something convincing and relevant for the audience it is necessary for the artists to practice and commit into the process of looking for the best techniques to understand and or create a character.

When actors and actresses are new and unexperienced, they need to start on basic exercises that will help them to understand their bodies, their emotions and their intentions so that they can be convincing performers. Those exercises can also be adapted and applied into different fields such as the foreign language class.

The use of drama in education and language teaching

Drama is an artistic activity whose general purpose cannot only be limited to mere entertainment, as a literary form, it is also called to instruct people on different aspects. More than just the act of going to the theater to watch a performance and learn from it, it is important to consider what is not easily visible on stage: the preparation process. That process can help language teachers and students in many different ways. That is, there are different techniques and exercises that are used in theater when preparing a play, many of them can have an interesting didactic value in terms of language teaching.

According to Wessels (1987) as quoted by Křivková (2011), “drama in education uses the same tools employed by actors in the theatre. But while in the theatre everything is contrived for the benefit of the audience, in classroom everything is contrived for the benefit of the learners” (p. 9). Therefore, the main goal of using drama activities and techniques in the English class is to benefit the teaching-learning process, especially the development of students’ linguistic skills. Nonetheless, it is necessary to point out that speaking skills are not the only abilities that will be benefited by the use of theater or drama techniques in a language class. In order to get this type of exercises or activities accomplished it is necessary to learn how to make use of the body, the voice, the projection of one’s image, among others. Acting requires people to know how to portray someone they are not, how to observe, how to create and how to present that someone. In

doing so, actors and actresses must explore the possibilities of their bodies and that will generate several benefits in terms of self-esteem, confidence and knowledge of oneself.

Křivková (2011) states that drama education “can be exploited in the instruction in several different ways. However, the most appropriate form of using Drama Education in the context of foreign language teaching is to apply it as a method of work” (p. 10). It has to be a practical process that gets students involved into a creative activity in which they can become more imaginative, more sensitive, more social and more dynamic. It is a hands-on process, which leads to exploration and practice. It is important to understand that nothing is wrong or right, it is just what the student is able to produce at a specific time and place; it will eventually improve by means of constant practice and interaction. There should always be support and collaboration from the instructor to the students. Peer-feedback and group support should be stimulated as well. In the game of acting or theater, it is important for instructors to be clear on what they are expecting students to accomplish. They should set the limits and the directions. Students will not necessarily reach everything at first, but they can play with it and discover how far they can get so that the process could be viewed as useful, effective and fruitful.

In the case of language teaching, the use of drama education seems to be more beneficial since it can eventually lower anxiety and stress, at the same time, it can place students into fictional scenarios in which they can use the target language in a realistic and spontaneous way. As teachers, it

is necessary to provide students with meaningful learning. That learning can only be achieved by putting students into different situations in which they can see that whatever they learned or studied is useful and relevant. If learning is relevant it would probably stay longer than if students do not find a way to make use of it.

Davies (1990) establishes that teachers need to create an atmosphere in which they as well as the students feel comfortable with all what they are going to learn and enjoy. Drama activities, continues Davies (1990), could be used at any stage or level. That is one of the most important advantages of this type of activities: they can be adapted to different levels, contexts and topics. In fact, one single activity, could be used to teach or to practice almost any content at almost any level, it is a matter of creativity on the teacher's side.

Nilsson (2009) believes that there are different activities that can be developed based on theatrical methods. For instance, implementing a situational conversation between students in which language can be used in a real context could foster students' speaking skills. However, there are other methods that may enhance not just speaking skills but body language and self-confidence, among others.

Benefits from the use of theater and drama activities in language teaching

The use of theater and drama activities in a language class could provide students several benefits to be described. For instance, Desialova (2009), as mentioned by Chukuegguhere (2012), presents a list

of reasons why the use of drama in the language classroom could be viewed as a powerful tool. Some of the reasons presented are the following:

1. Drama is an ideal way to encourage learners to communicate for real-life purposes.
2. To make language learning an active motivating experience.
3. To help learners gain the confidence and self-esteem needed to use the language spontaneously.
4. To bring the real world into the classroom.
5. To make language learning memorable through direct experience.
6. To stimulate learner' intellect, imagination, and creativity.
7. To develop students' ability to empathize with others and thus become better communicators. (p. 2).

So, as we can see, the use of drama activities in the classroom goes beyond mere entertainment. It gives students the chance to explore different areas and improve a group of skills that would not be stimulated in other cases. Drama activities can get students close to the meaningful learning that many teachers long for.

Üstündağ (1997), on the other hand, considers that "drama encourages children to learn how to influence others and how to put themselves in other people's shoes" (p. 89). Then, by means of the use of drama we can help to create citizens with a better sense of empathy and tolerance towards others. Those two characteristics are desirable inside the classroom context because they can help to build stronger educational processes.

Besides the social and interpersonal benefits, students can also improve their linguistic skills by means of the use of drama activities in the language class. As it was stated before, the students would be using language in a more realistic way, that is: dialogues that will eventually communicate relevant information in a real life context. This would help students to understand pragmatic aspects of the language.

On the other hand, by means of the constant repetition of dialogues, students can master the correct use of certain structures as well as the correct pronunciation of both isolated words and phrases. Something that is recommendable for example is to give students the chance to write down their own dialogues by using the amount of language and structures they know. In that way we can guarantee a more meaningful process that would also encourage teamwork and collaboration.

Specific aspects to be considered for the implementation of the activities to be presented in this document

All of the activities to be presented in this article are based on the syllabus of the Ministry of Public Education of Costa Rica (MEP). They respond to the contents and objectives of the national syllabus for third cycle, so they can eventually be used on students whose ages go from 12 to 15 years old approximately. Nevertheless, age is just a number that is being presented because of the contents that are covered with the activities, but all of the activities presented can be used with almost any age.

The linguistic level of the students who may make use of these activities does not have to be too high; actually, each of the activities to be presented can be adapted to almost any level, and they are all focused on developing students' speaking skills.

Regarding space, all the activities can be developed in a regular classroom. The teacher has to make sure to arrange the classroom in a way that there is enough space for students to be standing and moving. Not all of the students have to be moving all the time, but they will all eventually do it, so it is better to consider that.

Students might be working in groups or in pairs during the activities. No individual work will be necessary since the activities are aimed to encourage teamwork, cooperation, and group support. In addition, something that is worth mentioning is the fact that no materials will be necessary because all students are using is their bodies and their voices.

In general, the teacher will work as a facilitator, someone who is in charge of providing students clear instructions and all the necessary guidance. This has to be a creative process in which students are the main protagonists of their learning. Considering the fact that not all of the students are actors or actresses and that perhaps the interpersonal, intrapersonal or kinesthetic intelligences are not their dominant ones it is important not to expect perfection at first. Teachers have to motivate students to do their best in each activity.

Activities

Activity number one: Talking with numbers

- **Time:** It depends on the amount of students that participate in the activity. **Materials:** None
- **Grouping:** Pairs or trios
- **Objective:** Practicing pronunciation of numbers and using natural intonation in a simple dialogue
- **Directions:** Students are grouped in pairs or in trios; each group is given 5 minutes to prepare a short conversation about any simple daily life situation. The dialogue can only make use of numbers, regular words are not permitted. Once the dialogue is done, each group has to present it in front of the class and the rest of the students has to guess what each dialogue is about.
- **Example:** Student A and B create a short dialogue that will sound like this:

Student A: "1"
 Student B: "1"
 Student B: "457?"
 Student A: "5678, 5?"
 Student B: "3"
 Student A: "45?"
 Student B: "78"
 Student A: "6"
 Student B: "6"

The idea is that students A and B make good and exaggerated use of body language and gestures to convey meaning and help the audience guess what the numbers they used stand for. Once the dialogue is presented, the audience presents ideas and comments

about what they think the conversation was about so that the dialogue would be something like this:

Student A: "Hi"
 Student B: "Hi"
 Student B: How are you?
 Student A: I'm great, you?
 Student B: "I'm worried about tomorrow's test"
 Student A: "Tomorrow's test?"
 Student B: "Yes!"
 Student A: "Bye"
 Student B: "Bye"

- **Possible adaptations:** Depending on the contents as well as on the previous knowledge of the students, it is possible to include the use of conjunctions or even some connectors so that the message could be conveyed more easily or that the students can make use of them. On the other hand, this activity could be developed with any kind of vocabulary. The idea is to practice pronunciation and to internalize specific words.

Activity number two: Statues

- **Time:** It depends on the amount of students that participate in the activity
- **Materials:** None
- **Grouping:** Pairs
- **Objective:** Presenting and talking about different occupations
- **Directions:** Students work in pairs. One of them will be a sculptor and the other one will be a statue to be sculpted. This statue represents an occupation. Each pair of students is given 3 minutes to represent an occupation by "sculpting" the

body of one of the members of the team. When the statue is done, the rest of the class has to guess the occupation the statue represents. Once the guessing is done, the class has to talk about the occupation being represented. They have to use simple sentences by making use of the simple present tense.

- **Example:** Two students work together. Student A is the sculptor and student B is the statue. In this case, student A decided that he or she wants student B to represent a teacher, so he or she will move student B's hands in a way that they will point a board to represent a teacher's prototypical pose in a way that the class can guess what the statue represents. Once the statue is ready, the instructor can ask the class if they know what occupation is being represented, when they guess it, the instructor can ask some questions related to that occupation to the audience such as: What does he or she do?, where does he or she work?, Does she or he like his or her job?
- **Possible adaptations:** Even though this activity is aimed to review jobs and occupations, the statues could represent almost anything. In that case, the options are endless, and they would depend on the teacher's needs. For instance, verbs, adjectives, among others, could also be represented by means of this activity.

Activity number three: Charades

- **Time:** It depends on the amount of students that participate in the activity.

- **Materials:** Construction paper
- **Grouping:** Groups from 4 to 5 students
- **Objective:** Describing people's physical appearance
- **Directions:** Students are divided in small groups. Each group is given a set of different names of famous people (politicians, singers, actors, actresses, among others). The subgroups have to send a member to provide the physical characteristics of the famous person they got on the paper. They can only use gestures, no spoken language is permitted. Students are allowed to provide at least six characteristics, if the group doesn't guess the name after those six characteristics, they can pass to the next famous name.
- **Example:** In this case, the student could select the name of the famous Colombian singer Shakira, then, he can provide six physical characteristics of this person (using gestures only). In the case of this character, six characteristics could be:

- 1-She is short.
- 2-She has long hair.
- 3-She has curly hair.
- 4-she has big eyes.
- 5-She is slim.
- 6-She is young.

- **Possible adaptations:** Charades are probably one of the most used activities in many different contexts due to its facility and the enjoyment they provide. Topics to be studied by means of this activity are very different and the rules could also be adapted depending

on what the teacher wants the students to accomplish.

Activity number four: Broken TV

- **Time:** It depends on the amount of students that participate in the activity.
- **Materials:** None
- **Grouping:** The whole class participates
- **Objective:** Representing different daily life situations in which natural speech is used
- **Directions:** The students are going to act out a scene of a daily life situation. At the beginning two students will start the situation, after a minute or two, the instructor will use a “remote control” to pause the scene, after that, any student from the group can go a replace one of the students that are acting. This student will say “play” and he or she will have to change the story being presented for a new one. The person that was participating in the previous situation must adapt to the new context and improvise. The process can be repeated as long as necessary.
- **Example:** Two students can start a situation in which one of them is the mother and the other one is the daughter. The daughter could be requesting some sort of permission from her mother to go somewhere and the mother might not want to let her go. When the instructor “pauses” the situation, another person from the audience stands up and takes the mom’s place and begins a totally different situation so that the person that was playing the daughter now might be a teacher

trying to explain simple past tense to a student (the new participant) who can’t pay attention to her. The same process can be repeated as many times as needed and the participants are the ones that have to come up with different situations and adapt to what others propose.

- **Possible adaptations:** As a way to adapt the activity in order to make it easier for the students, the teacher can previously select the situations and distribute them among the students so that each of them knows what he or she is going to talk about. For example: a wedding proposal, a jealous boyfriend, a medical appointment, two friends gossiping, among others.

Activity number five: Objects and occupations

- **Time:** It depends on the amount of students that participate in the activity.
- **Materials:** Different objects. For example: a hat, a pair of sunglasses, a pair of scissors, a tie, a book, a spoon, a purse, among others.
- **Grouping:** The whole class participates together in the first part, and then they will be separated in trios.
- **Objective:** Representing different occupations.
- **Directions:** Students will sit on the floor, they will make a circle. Inside the circle there will be a group of different objects, students are told to observe the objects carefully and when they feel ready they have to pick one of them and start acting like the person that would normally use that specific object.

The instructor can ask different questions related to that character. After the students are done, they are divided in trios; each trio has to create a short conversation in which they have to act like the characters they created based on the objects they chose.

- **Possible adaptations:** Depending on the level of the students there are some changes that can be considered. For example, if students have a high level of English, the teacher can request them to produce impromptu speeches making use of the object he or she chose. The teacher can interact with each student or the student can be given the chance to interact with other students in the class in a spontaneous way.

Activity number six: Daily routines

- **Time:** It depends on the amount of students that participate in the activity.
- **Materials:** None.
- **Grouping:** Pairs.
- **Objective:** Describing people's daily routines.
- **Directions:** Students work in pairs, they have to go in front of the class. One of the students will mime his or her daily routine while the other one has to describe it using complete sentences, after that, they can switch their roles.
- **Possible adaptations:** This activity is suitable to give students the chance to use any verbal tense. If the content is simple past or simple future, the teacher can request students to make use of those structures.

Activity number seven: Pictures and corners

- **Time:** It depends on the instructor.
- **Materials:** None.
- **Grouping:** The whole class can participate at the same time.
- **Objective:** Describing and representing different situations by means of body language.
- **Directions:** Students are told that each corner will represent a specific place (the beach, the park, the class, among others). Then, anytime they are requested to be in those corners they have to portray an action that could be happening in that moment, they have to stay still since they are all in a "picture"; however, the instructor can ask anyone different questions related to the actions they are representing and they have the chance to talk and explain what they are doing.
- **Example:** In corner number one students can be requested to represent a typical beach day in which people are taking the sun, swimming, playing soccer, eating and or drinking. Corner number two can represent a classroom in which someone can be teaching, another person can be reading, others writing or even using the cellphone. Corner number three could represent a day in the park in which people can be eating, playing, flying a kite, riding a bike, among others. Finally, corner number four could represent a party so that people are dancing, talking, laughing, drinking, listening to music and so on.
- **Possible adaptations:** Depending on the level of the students, they

can be asked to just say a sentence using any specific verbal tense or grammatical structure or to make a complete description of the “picture”, for example: “María is taking the sun, John is preparing a sandwich, and Tom is swimming”. Also, if the teacher wants to, he or she can request a student to make a previous description of the picture and the rest of the class has to represent it.

Activity number eight: Greetings and emotions

- **Time:** It depends on the instructor
- **Materials:** None
- **Grouping:** The whole class can participate at the same time
- **Objective:** Greeting each other while portraying different emotions
- **Directions:** the group is divided into two. They have to make two straight lines, one in front of the other, and those lines have to separate from each other. The idea is that students are going to run into each other and they have to say “hi”. But the way they say “hi” will change every time. For example, the instructor would ask them to be angry when saying “hi” or to be sad or they will be asked to act like different types of people when saying “hi”. The action can be repeated as many times as necessary.
- **Possible adaptations:** another possibility that this activity offers is for example the use of other vocabulary. For instance, if the teacher wants to review or to study the parts of the body, he or

she can ask the students to “say hi” with some specific parts of the body. For example: say hi with you elbows. In this case, students will be able to recognize the parts of the body which can help them learn new words and increase their vocabulary.

Conclusions

The use of theater and drama techniques in the English class is a tool that could be efficient since it provides students with interesting and different ways to assimilate their language learning process.

In this article it is easy to see how a set of activities that are normally used in theater can be adapted to make them work in a classroom context. Those are just a few examples of all the things that can be done by means of theater. These are all interactive and very cheap ideas, as it was seen in the activities previously described, no materials are necessary for the implementation of any of them which makes them even more attractive since they do not require a lot of time of preparation and they are useful to enhance students’ oral skills.

The activities have been proved in a real classroom with real students and they have showed to be beneficial, they can also be adapted to be used with a different population and different topics as well.

In addition, the author has had the chance to instruct other English teachers and share the activities and the experiences described in this article and the results have been very positive. For instance, the activities have been

developed in different workshops: two in San Carlos at a congress organized by Technological Institute of Costa Rica (TEC), another one at the Pacific Campus of the Universidad de Costa Rica with English teachers from the Central Pacific area and finally another one with English teaching major students from the Pacific Campus of the Universidad de Costa Rica. During all of those workshops it was possible to put into practice every idea previously presented in this document and that is how the adaptations came out. All of the participants of the workshops considered the activities are useful and that they are very easy to carry out since they do not require a lot of resources and or physical space. At the same time, they are not time consuming and they can help students to relax and have fun while learning or putting into practice something they studied.

Similarly, it is important to point out that these activities can be used as controlled and creative practices depending on what the teacher wants the students to achieve by means of their implementation.

On the other hand, it is necessary to consider the fact that not everyone is always willing to be acting in front of others, which would be the most important limitation to consider. In that case, it is the instructor's responsibility to try to motivate and encourage the students to take part of the activities to be developed, so that they can discover the benefits that they can provide them with.

It is also important to consider the space that is available for the development of the activities. Normally, teachers have the chance to work in a classroom. Nevertheless, sometimes and due to space issues, some teachers find

themselves developing their classes anywhere. That could be another limitation. It is necessary to count with a place to develop the exercises.

Finally, I would personally encourage teachers to dare and try to use different ideas in their daily classes, surprise students and I guarantee they will surprise you even more. Education is an entire world of possibilities, as teachers all we have to do is to innovate in our practice. Let's dare to act and learn! Break a leg while enjoying learning a second language!

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